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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions of teachers experienced in working with mixed-age groups in child care settings for children from birth through age 12. A mixed-age group was defined as one with children having at least a two-year range in age. Questionnaires were mailed to 92 licensed family child care and school-age child care providers in Virginia, with a 27 percent response rate. Teachers responded to open-ended questions regarding the benefits and disadvantages of working with mixed-age groups. Results showed that providers agreed that both older and younger children more readily learn sharing, new skills, and new roles. Older children learn patience, nurturing, family roles, and leadership; younger children more rapidly learn sharing, new skills, and language. Providers perceived very few adverse affects to managing a mixed-age group of children. The primary concern was with individual supervision and ability to meet children's individual needs, such as meals and toileting. A checklist is included to assist with the decision of whether to implement mixed-age groupings of young children. (MM)

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Teacher Perception of Mixed-Age Groupings of Children

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Abstract

Previous literature outlines the advantages and disadvantages of mixing ages of children based on child outcomes such as achievement. Previous research has primarily focused on one year of age span for research on mixed-age groupings.

This study defines mixed-ages as at least a two years gap in age and examines teacher perception of mixed-age groupings from a practical standpoint of child care providers with experience caring for children from birth through age 12.

Results show provider agreement that for both older and younger children, children more readily learn sharing, new skills, and new roles. For the older child, in particular, they learn patience, nurturing, family roles, and leadership. The younger child more rapidly learns to share, learns new skills - language in particular, and is more nurtured.

Providers perceived very few adverse affects to actually managing a mixed-age group of children. The primary concern is with individual supervision and ability to meet children's individual needs (meals, toileting).

Researchers recommend that teachers considering mixed age groupings of children give careful consideration to mixing ages and consider specific reasons

for the decision. A checklist has been design to assist with the decision of mixed-age groupings of young children.

TEACHER PERCEPTION OF MIXED-AGE GROUPINGS OF CHILDREN

Grouping children into same-age clusters in early childhood programs is based on the assumption that chronological age is the single most reliable developmental index (Evangelou, 1989). Research with young children suggests that children adjust their behavior depending on social contexts, and that adjustment is in part, age related (Ellis, Rogoff, Cromer, 1981).

Other studies (Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1991; Howes & Farver, 1987; Solomon, Watson, Delucchi, Schaps & Battistich, 1988) indicate that there are many advantages for children enrolled in mixed-age groupings. Some of those remedial benefits are enhanced self-esteem and motivation, strengthened cooperation, the development of prosocial behaviors, the development of leadership and responsibility in older children, role modeling, enhanced language development in young children, concept formation, helpful relationships, and greater demonstration of autonomy and self-control. Since there is a wider range of competencies in a mixed-age group, there is more opportunity for children to develop relationships and friendships with others who match, complement, or supplement the child's own needs and styles (Evangelou, 1989). Mixing ages is desirable for children functioning below age group norms in some areas of development and is a natural environment of

child groupings similar to neighborhoods and families.

Disadvantages cited include organizational complications, safety concerns, difficulty meeting the needs of children, difficulty with child management involving attention and communication, and the necessity to have a wider range of toys and material variety (Katz, et al., 1991, Solomon et al., 1988).

A review of the literature pertaining to mixed-age groupings revealed a great deal of focus on a narrow age span of mixing children by age- generally mixing 2-3 year olds or 4-5 year olds together. Previous research also has focused primarily on child-related behaviors in classroom settings. Very few citations provide research relative to teacher perception about mixed-age groupings and the practiced manageability of these groups.

The literature supports an optimal age for mixing children of various ages. Just over two years of age to an upper limit of 7-8 years of age has proven to work best from a developmental aspect. Before age 2, young children have not gained sufficient social skills to form complex relevant behaviors necessary to sustain interactions and interrelate in mixed-age groups (Hartup, 1989). After age 7-8, there is a decline in playmate selection opting for same-age companions (Ellis, Rogoff, Cromer, 1981).

Other practical suggestions from the literature suggests 2 factors which

must be considered when reviewing mixed-age groupings: group size and age range of children. The larger the group size, the easier it is to segregate with similar peers. With wider age ranges available, cross-age interactions would not be as similar as same-age interactions (Goldman & Chaille, 1984). When teachers decide to mix ages of children, the rule of thumb is to use the child teacher ratio for the youngest child in the group.

For this study, we were interested in the perceptions of teachers who have experience working in child care settings with mixed-age groupings. From a practical point, a decision was made to focus on the largest provider population which may have experience with mixed-age groupings. Those settings primarily are in family child care and in school-age child care programs.

In preparation for the research, two preliminary sets of qualitative data were collected from family child care providers and school-age child care providers. These findings proved to supplement the literature and aided in the design of the final questionnaire.

Preliminary Search for Teacher Perceptions

Family child care providers and school-age child care teachers were asked about their perception considering a wider age span of children mixed in group settings.

Family Child Care Provider Perceptions

The Executive Leadership of the Virginia Alliance of Family Day Care Associations was asked to respond to open-ended questions regarding the benefits and advantages of mixed age groups. Results from 12 questionnaires provided additional components on first-hand observations noted in natural mixed-age groupings in family child care.

The age-range of these provider's children was birth through twelve years of age. These primary benefits were eventually included on the final questionnaire as additional items. Advantages within this family child care sample included much of what we already know from the literature. In addition to the listing already noted, a few additional items were generated. These include the following: mixed-ages provided more a family-type environment, there is an enhanced development of nurturance, patience, and sharing. Some of the disadvantages cited by the family child care providers included organizational complications and increased safety concerns.

School-age child care teacher perceptions

In addition to the new components suggested by family child care providers, open-ended suggestions were collected form 12 center-based and school-based school-age teachers in two university communities. Directors of

these programs were also asked to list the benefits and disadvantages of mixed-age groupings in school-age child care programs.

Again, there was much overlap from the points in the literature, but they suggested a few additional advantages. They include the following: it is cheaper to have one large group with 2 teachers than 2 groups with 3 teachers, older children are confidants, mixed-ages allows for more variety of experiences, and children learn to relate to people and care for and respect people of different ages.

They also suggested some disadvantages. In addition to those suggested by family child care providers, they added the following, younger children are often left out or frustrated because they can not keep up, are more tired at the end of the school day, and need smaller groups to play in and relax with without pressure. They also indicated that older children may not get the attention they need since younger children require more supervision.

Method and Sample Profile

This preliminary information was helpful but in order to further validate the advantages and disadvantages from the literature as well as the new indicators from a teacher's perception, a larger sample was surveyed. Questionnaires were mailed to licensed family child care and school-age child

care providers in Virginia. A 27% response rate was received from 92 providers.

Although the total population of licensed family child care and random sample of school-age and center-based child care programs were surveyed, the profile of respondents was rather balanced. There were 41% rural respondents and 59% urban respondents.

The range of education included 40% Bachelor's Degree, 26% who were High school graduates, 27% Associate degrees, CDA or certification and 8% who had Graduate degrees. Forty-seven percent had child development course work and 51% did not.

Years of experience ranged from 1 year to over 15 years. Only 1% of the respondents were new to the child care profession with one to two years, while 12% had been in child care for three to five years and 32% from six to ten years. Twenty-three percent had 11-15 years of experience and 32% had over 15 years of experience in child care. The type of child care setting included 52% home-based providers, 34% center-based, and 14% school-based. The age range of children in care was birth to 18 years. Seventy percent provided care for children birth to two years, and seventy-three percent provided care for children five to 12 years of age.

Providers were asked if they mix age groups of children on a regular bases. Sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated that they used mixed age groupings and 34% indicated that they separate children by age. Of respondents, 82% were licensed. The remaining were exempt but appeared on the licensure mailing list.

Results

Respondents were asked to rank the qualities which they considered important in a child care environment. There were 8 items, providing a range in the means from zero to eight. Safety was most often ranked as the MOST important and respect for the child was MOST often ranked as second most important. Table 1 outlines the remaining rankings.

Insert Table 1 about here

For general information, a crosstabulation was done between educational level and the way respondents ranked their items as important. Those with high school completion and no college indicated that nurturance was most important. Those with a child development certificate or any college degree ranked safety as most important.

Basically both home and center providers agreed with each other on what is learned in mixed-age groupings. The most popular notions selected by providers for both older and younger children are that they learn new roles and new skills in mixed-age groups. Older children develop more leadership skills, more advanced nurturing abilities, learn greater patience and develop more a positive self-esteem. They also indicated that older children learn family roles more readily in mixed age groupings and felt as if mixed-age groupings are more beneficial to the older child when separating from parents (65%) as opposed to the younger child (54%). For younger children, mixed-age groups provide more opportunities to learn new skills, in particular language. Young children also are more nurtured.

Differences between older and younger children were found with benefits outweighing disadvantages. Disadvantages found were not significant even for bad habit development. Only 29% of the providers felt as if older children would develop more bad habits and 65% of the providers felt as if younger children would. Table 2 outlines all of the factors with a cross tabulation by the type of child care provider responding.

Insert Table 2 about here

Finally providers were asked to review aspects of personal and classroom management. These items included creativity, safety, supervision, giving directions, planning, and transitions. They were asked to indicate if their perception was that these practices increased or decreased when providers mix ages of children. This provides indication of how providers feel that they can manage mixed-age groupings. Table 3 summarizes responses. Basically all aspects of classroom and group management are increased through mixed-age groupings except for individual supervision.

Insert Table 3 about here

Summary

In summary the key findings were responding providers perceive safety, respect, positive feedback, and a nurturing environment of most importance for children in child care, and they perceived very few adverse affects to managing a mixed-age group of children. The primary concern was individual

supervision and ability to meet children's individual needs (meals, toileting).

Both home and center respondents agreed that in mixed-age groupings, for both ages, they learned sharing, new skills, and new roles. For the older child, in particular, they learned patience, nurturing, family roles, and leadership. The younger child more rapidly learned to share, new skills-language in particular, and was more nurtured.

Providers did not feel, however, that children are overwhelmingly exposed to more illness in mixed-age groupings, that younger ones overwhelmingly learned bad habits, or that mixed-age groupings particularly were helpful in separating from parents, although slightly more for older children than younger ones.

Suggestions to teachers considering mixed age groupings of children was to give consideration to mixing ages for specific reasons. Mixing ages because it may be in vogue or for general interest may not be appropriate. However, carefully thinking about the children's needs, the classroom environment, personal management skills, and the child care philosophy will guide the decision. The following checklist was designed to assist with the decision of mixed-age groupings of young children.

Insert checklist about here

When the answer to one or more of the questions on the checklist is positive, then mixing ages may be appropriate. As an option, mixing age groups can be done on a part day basis.

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Table 1

Teacher Perceptions of Important Factors in a Child Care Environment

Item	Mean (range 0-8)
Safety	6.9
Respect for child with positive feedback	6.6
Nurturing caregiver	6.0
Child is involved in meaningful activities	5.1
Consistent communication with parents	4.4
Providers with training in child care and development	4.3
Organization and routine for children	4.2

Table 2

Provider Perception of Effects on Older and Younger Children When Involved in Mixed-Age Groupings

Characteristic	Center-based provider response	Home-based provider response	School-based child care programs	Total agreeing on this characteristic
Learns sharing	94% (66)	86% (94)	80% (91)	86% (84)
Learns patience	88% (85)	90% (80)	93% (80)	90% (82)
Learns new skills	77% (94)	95% (99)	87% (93)	86% (95)
Learns nurturing abilities	86% (63)	99% (91)	100% (66)	95% (73)
Learns family roles	80% (73)	92% (90)	93% (60)	88% (74)
Learns new roles	91% (97)	98% (92)	100% (93)	96% (94)
Learns to increase attention span	45% (63)	75% (81)	63% (100)	61% (81)
Learns bad habits	29% (70)	33% (58)	25% (66)	29% (65)
Learns traditional gender roles	66% (55)	69% (59)	66% (50)	67% (55)

				Mixed-ages 19
Learns leadership skills	97% (70)	96% (86)	100% (69)	98% (75)
Learns new language skills	65% (97)	76% (100)	66% (100)	66% (99)
Exposed to more illness	29% (38)	31% (43)	13% (8)	24% (30)
Nurtured more by other children	50% (75)	63% (95)	66% (79)	60% (83)
Likely to develop positive self-esteem	97% (77)	96% (93)	100% (71)	98% (80)
Less upset by separation	52% (42)	77% (69)	64% (75)	64% (54)

The percentage in parentheses represents the total percent of providers perception for this characteristic for younger children.

Table 3

Increase or decrease of classroom management aspects in mixed-age groupings

Management or personal attribute	Increases in mixed-age groupings	Decreases in mixed-age groupings
Organization	63%	21%
Safety	55%	26%
Creativity	77%	11%
Individual supervision	34%	48%
Group supervision	66%	13%
Ability to meet children's needs (meals, toilet)	45%	33%
Giving directions	64%	17%
Planning activities	66%	20%
Transitions	54%	26%

Checklist for Mixed-Age Groupings

What is the age range of the children? (Optimal mixes are between 2 and 8)

What is the group size expected to be? (Smaller groups are more manageable)

Are the following reasons for mixing ages in your situation?

Younger children need a richer language environment.

Younger children need to develop attachments to others.

Younger children need to extend their attention span.

Older children need to learn more responsibility.

Older children need more leadership opportunities.

Older children need more exposure to positive family type atmospheres where they can learn nurturing and take on new roles.

Older children need to feel more positive and younger children need to learn from older children.

Some older children may have difficulty from separating from parents.

Work on positive self-esteem is necessary for both ages.

Children need to learn greater patience.

Teacher feels a need for a new and creative challenge.

Activity planning and learning designs are easily adaptable for the range of ages.